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Military Spying Report Took Senator One Year

Has Been Warning U.S.,
Now People Listen

By JARED STOUT

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WASHINGTON — For a year, Sen. Sam J. Ervin (D-N.C.) has warned Americans they are losing their personal freedoms in a "dossier society" where their private lives and views are under increasing government scrutiny.

Few of his speeches caused great excitement among the handful of Senate colleagues that bothered to listen. But this past week Ervin shocked the senate and the House — and most Americans — by airing accounts of how military agents spied on prominent politicians.

The disclosures of former army undercover agent John M. O'Brien, 26, of Evanston, Ill., sharply focused national attention on how far government prying has gone — right to the Congress itself.

O'Brien named Sen. Adlai E. Stevenson III (D-Ill.) and former Illinois Gov. Otto Kerner as individuals he himself had spied upon for the 113th military intelligence group (MIG) in Chicago.

300 AGENCIES

His former unit is but one of 300 army intelligence field offices across the country with an agent force of 1,000 or more men. And O'Brien and other agents have said the operations he described were not unique.

The questions raised immediately by Ervin were how many other prominent figures are being watched, for what purpose, under whose orders, and to what use the information gathered has been put.

Whether the questions are answered fully is up to Ervin and other congressional investigators who have promised thorough inquiries into just how far the military has overstepped its authority in watching civilians.

Getting answers will be a tough job. It will require congressional penetration of the secret world of military intelligence where even yesterday's newspaper clippings may be classified, and perhaps even the headquarters of army spying, Ft. Holabird, Md.

O'Brien has pinpointed Holabird, Md.

bird, located near Baltimore, as the place where the "direction to conduct domestic spying activity was levied" on Army intelligence units across the country.

HOLABIRD SCHOOL

Earlier this year, another former military intelligence agent who taught at the Holabird School for Army agents disclosed the existence there of computerized dossiers on civilian dissenters. He said the army had started watching civilians in 1965.

The army denied the existence of the Dossiers. It took the personal visit by Army General Counsel Robert E. Jordan III to discover not one, but two such data banks at Holabird.

Earlier this month, Jordan recalled the then commanding general of intelligence had said

he knew nothing of the computerized dossiers. "I don't think he lied to me," Jordan said. "I don't think he knew about them."

Jordan also said in the interview neither he nor any of the other civilian bosses of the army "ever imagined" the service would collect data on individuals. He said the computers were shut down and the material in them ordered destroyed.

At the same time, Army Secretary Stanley R. Resor prepared and issued in March, a policy letter aimed at shutting down what Jordan said was unauthorized surveillance of civilians.

CIVILIAN REPORTS

But in his accounts, O'Brien said his unit was reporting material on civilians to Holabird throughout his tour with the 113th MIG—from June, 1969, until his honorable discharge as a staff sergeant last June 8.

Moreover, other agents have said they believe the material used to prepare the computerized dossiers at Ft. Holabird still exists, along with the smaller files kept in local offices.

Resor this week denied military agents spied on Sen. Stevenson and others named by O'Brien as his targets or those of other men in the 113th MIG.

Resor did not deny the existence of dossiers on these figures or some 800 individuals in Hanoi alone whose activities were chronicled in what O'Brien termed the "subversives file" of the 113th MIG.

This makes the contents of such files—at the 113th MIG and across the country—a critical element in any showdown pitting Army Secretary Resor's word against that of a former staff sergeant and any other former agent who may step forward.

Both Resor and O'Brien already are scheduled to testify before senator Ervin's subcommittee on constitutional rights in February, when hearings on government snooping are set to open.

FOCUS ON ARMY

The focus will be on the Army, because of the O'Brien story. But that will not be the end of Senator Ervin's concerns which reach into the operations of civilian agencies too.

Ervin's year-long effort has put great emphasis on the amount of information being gathered on individuals by all agencies, from the Secret Service to the Department of Health, Education and Welfare. In all cases, Ervin believes there may be a need for legislation to curb the collection process or, at least, give individuals the right to know what information is being kept on them.

None of the systems presently operated by government give individuals that right, much less a chance to challenge the accuracy of information kept on them or to have it removed if it is wrong.

O'Brien's accounts of military spying, however, are the most ominous evidence yet of where an unchecked, unsupervised system can lead.

In his letter to Ervin, O'Brien said "I find that I'm living in an atmosphere of mistrust."

The question before Ervin and other congressional investigations is where they can restore a sense of trust in their government for O'Brien and all Americans.